



Figure 1 The throne room in the Ch'u Hsiu Kung (Chu Xiu Gong, Palace of Harbouring Grace), Forbidden City, Peking



Figure 2 The Hall of Great Supremacy in the Ch'ang Ch'un Kung (Chang Chun Gong, Palace of Eternal Spring), Forbidden City, Peking

CLASSIC CHINESE FURNITURE IN TZU-T'AN WOOD

Grace Wu Bruce

Photographs, unless otherwise indicated,
courtesy of Grace Wu Bruce Co. Ltd

VISITORS TO THE Forbidden City in Peking (Beijing), whether peering through the doorways of the grand halls or silently tiptoeing through the throne rooms of the palace complexes, reminiscing about the days gone by, or even strolling through the more intimate imperial living quarters, will be awed by the boundless treasures on display in formal arrangements of furniture. These are made of painted or gilded lacquer or wood, inlaid with precious stones, mother-of-pearl or colourful cloisonné, in the most elaborate and fantastic shapes. Among the wooden furniture, one is struck by the consistent dominance of tables and chairs, thrones and screens, cabinets and incense stands, all made of a wood as black as coal (Figures 1 and 2). This cabinet wood the Chinese call *tzu-t'an* (zitan).

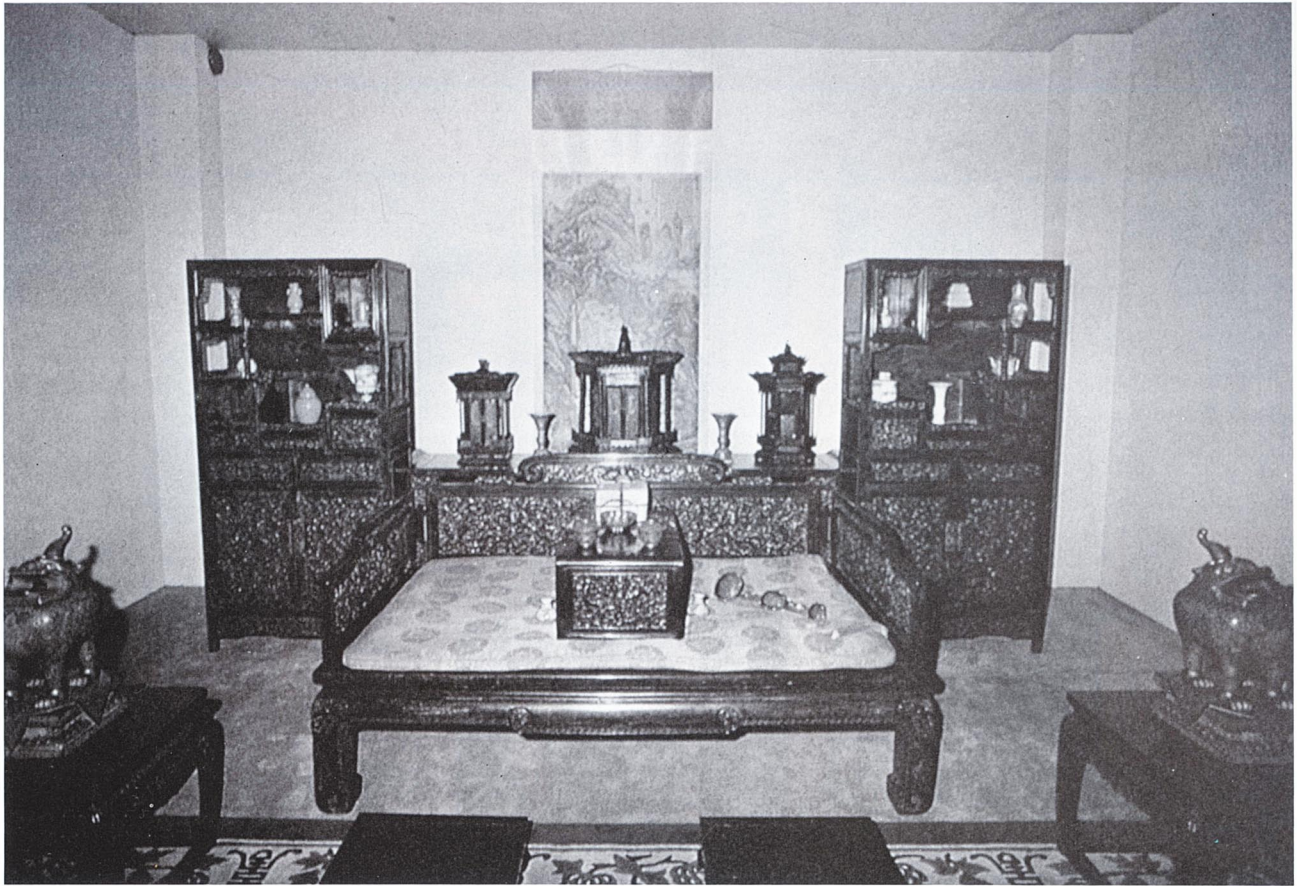


Figure 3 The tzu-t'an furniture setting from the Kung Ch'in Wan Fu (Gong Qin Wan Fu), National Palace Museum, Taipei, courtesy of the National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan

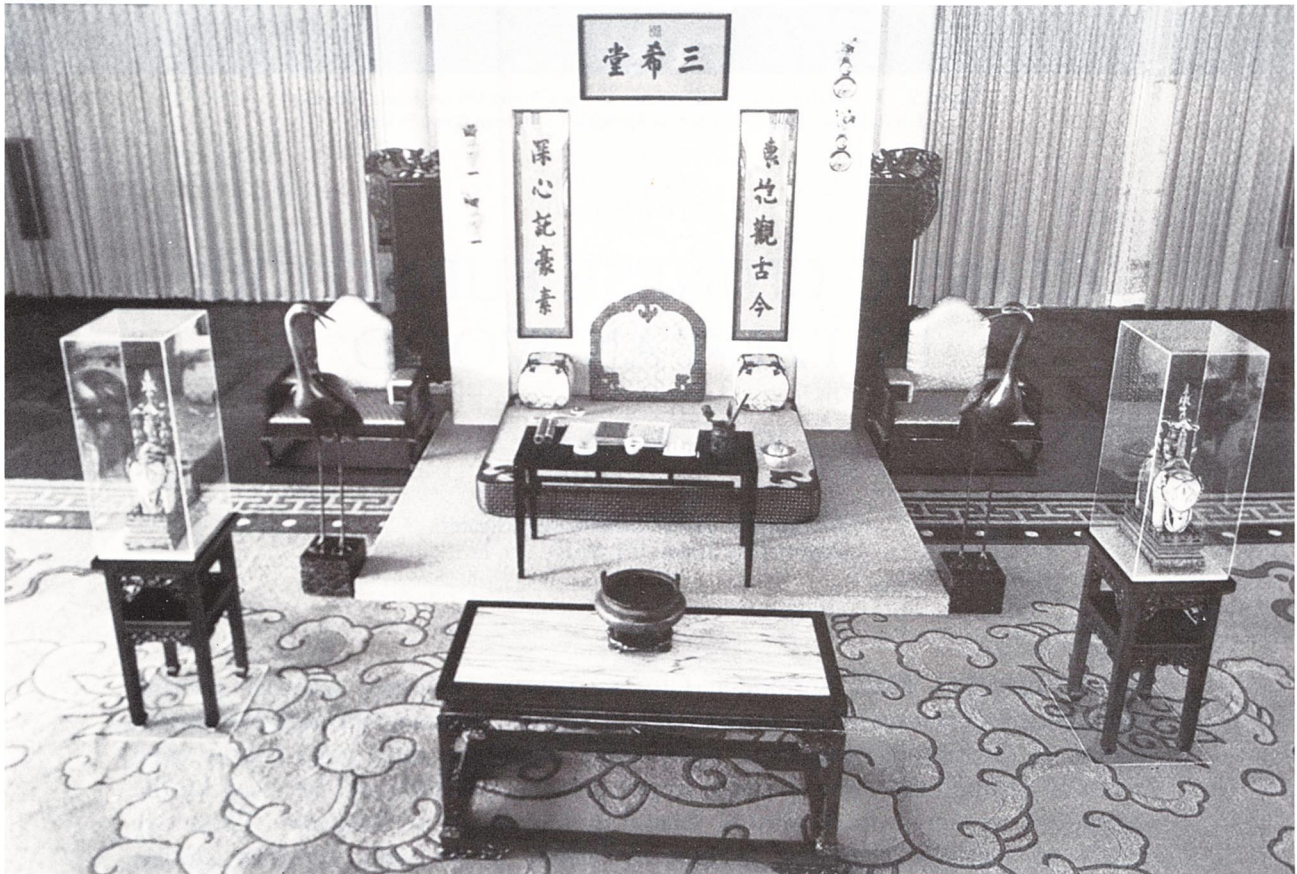


Figure 4 The San Tsi Tang, a National Palace Museum, Taipei, re-creation of the tzu-t'an arrangement in the Yang Hsin Tien (Yang Xin Dian) in the Forbidden City, Peking, courtesy of the National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan

Visits to the Summer Palace, the summer retreat at Ch'eng-te (Chengde, formerly known as Jehol), as well as other notable historic buildings, will confirm the high regard in which tzu-t'an furniture was held by the rulers of dynastic China.

The National Palace Museum in Taipei, reputed home of the largest and best collection of Chinese art in many areas, displays only tzu-t'an furniture in its scholar's studio and other areas with furniture arrangements (Figures 3 and 4).

It is of little wonder that the twentieth century observer will surmise that the people of China, modern or pre-modern, prefer wooden furniture made of tzu-t'an over all other materials.

Tzu-t'an, a tropical hardwood belonging to the genus *Pterocarpus* of the Leguminosae family, made its appearance in a Chinese text as early as the third century¹. During the Ming (1368–1644) and Ch'ing (Qing, 1644–1911) dynasties, large quantities of it were imported. The bulk of the cabinet wood traded under the name of tzu-t'an was most likely *Pterocarpus indicus*² which, according to Ch'en Jung (Chen Rong) in *The Classification of Chinese Woods*³, grows in India, the Philippines, the Malay peninsula and China's Kwangtung (Guangdong) province.

Of all the hardwoods, it is the heaviest, the most closely grained and the hardest. Its colour varies from a reddish brown (Figure 5) to the more familiar purplish black (Figure 6). Some examples however are as black as lacquer and the grain and figuring are hardly discernible. For the most part, the grains are straight, occasionally with small wavy curls. When worked, the wood turns a bright orange-red. This is true even with newly opened surfaces on old wood.

The mystique of tzu-t'an's appeal has been much alluded to: its subtle quiescence, its aura of antiquity, its satin-like lustre, its jade smooth texture, its sheer beauty and, of course, its rarity.

If the Chinese scholar and collector Wang Shih-hsiang (Wang Shixiang) is, in the words of the Scottish scholar Craig Clunas, the father of Chinese furniture, then his magnificent Ming dynasty tzu-t'an painting table (Figure 7) may well be the father of tzu-t'an painting tables. Measuring 190 centimetres long, 74 centimetres deep and 78 centimetres high, its strong and pure form is augmented by the material employed—dark black tzu-t'an—in its solemnity, dignity and antiquity. Adding to the contemporary appeal of this piece is the black lacquered floating panel table top, considered by late Ming scholars *de rigueur* for good taste in furniture⁴.

An essential accompaniment to the gentleman scholar's way of life in the late Ming dynasty was the musical instrument, the lute. Correspondingly, the furniture it was played on also received critical attention⁵ as to what size and what material were best suited to what settings and for which instruments.

The exquisite example of a lute table in Figure 8 is made of tzu-t'an, the aprons beautifully shaped and decorated with open-work tendrils. The S shaped braces, joining the legs to the stretchers underneath the table top, provide additional support. This feature, seen also in the previously mentioned painting table, is a unique feature of Chinese furniture of the Ming and early Ch'ing. The table top, like the previous example, is of a different material, here finely figured *chi ch'ih-mu* (jichimu, chicken's wing wood). The unusually large variation in colour of the apron, perhaps due to its proximity to the sap, offers an additional dimension to modern day connoisseurship of tzu-t'an. The cover of the small box illustrated in Figure 9 also has this pleasing variation.

Another scholarly attribute of old China was the appreciation of the aesthetics of rocks⁶. Large ones were placed in gardens while smaller ones were taken into the home and placed on tables and stands. Figure 11 illustrates an elegant stand made of tzu-t'an that may have been used for this purpose. Perfect in proportion, this piece embodies all the qualities that first brought twentieth century man's attention to classic Chinese furniture: simplicity of design, purity and elegance of line, and beauty of the natural woods. The frequent usage of a different material for table tops is confirmed here—an exquisite panel of burl wood—while *huang hua-li* (huanghuali, a prized hardwood) was used for the base.

Figure 10 shows a folding stool, a continuation of a standard design from ancient times. As early as the Han period (202 B.C.–A.D. 220), the name *hu-ch'uang* (huchuang, meaning barbarian bed) has been used to refer to stools of this design. This refined example made in tzu-t'an with an exquisite foot-rest is in the collection of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California.

The decorated stream of Ming tzu-t'an furniture is represented in our group by the magnificent throne (Figure 12) in the Palace Museum, Peking. It measures 98 centimetres wide, 78 centimetres deep and 109 centimetres high and is entirely carved with lotus flowers, stems and leaves except for the seat and the waist. The realistic rendering of

For convenience, the author's original pinyin Romanisation has been retained in the footnotes

- 1 Cui Bao, *Gu Jin zhu* (Explanation of Ancient and Modern Matters), Caomu diliu, sibu congkan, sanbian, juan 2, p. 2.
- 2 Wang Shixiang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, Hong Kong, 1990, text volume, p. 149.
- 3 Chen Rong, *Zhong Guo Shu Mu Fen Lei Xue* (Classification of Chinese Woods), Shanghai Science and Technology Press, new edition 1, December 1959.

- 4 Craig Clunas, *Chinese Furniture*, Victoria and Albert Museum Far Eastern Series, London 1988, p. 42.
- 5 Wang Zuo, *Xinzheng Gegu yaolun* (a revised and enlarged edition of the Essential Criteria of Antiquities by Cao Zhao, 1388), 1462, Gu qin lun, p. 3.
- 6 Nancy Berliner, "The Rosenblum Collection of Chinese Rocks", *Orientalism*, November 1990, p. 68.



Figure 5 Tzu-t'an, reddish brown. Actual size



Figure 6 Tzu-t'an, purplish black. Actual size

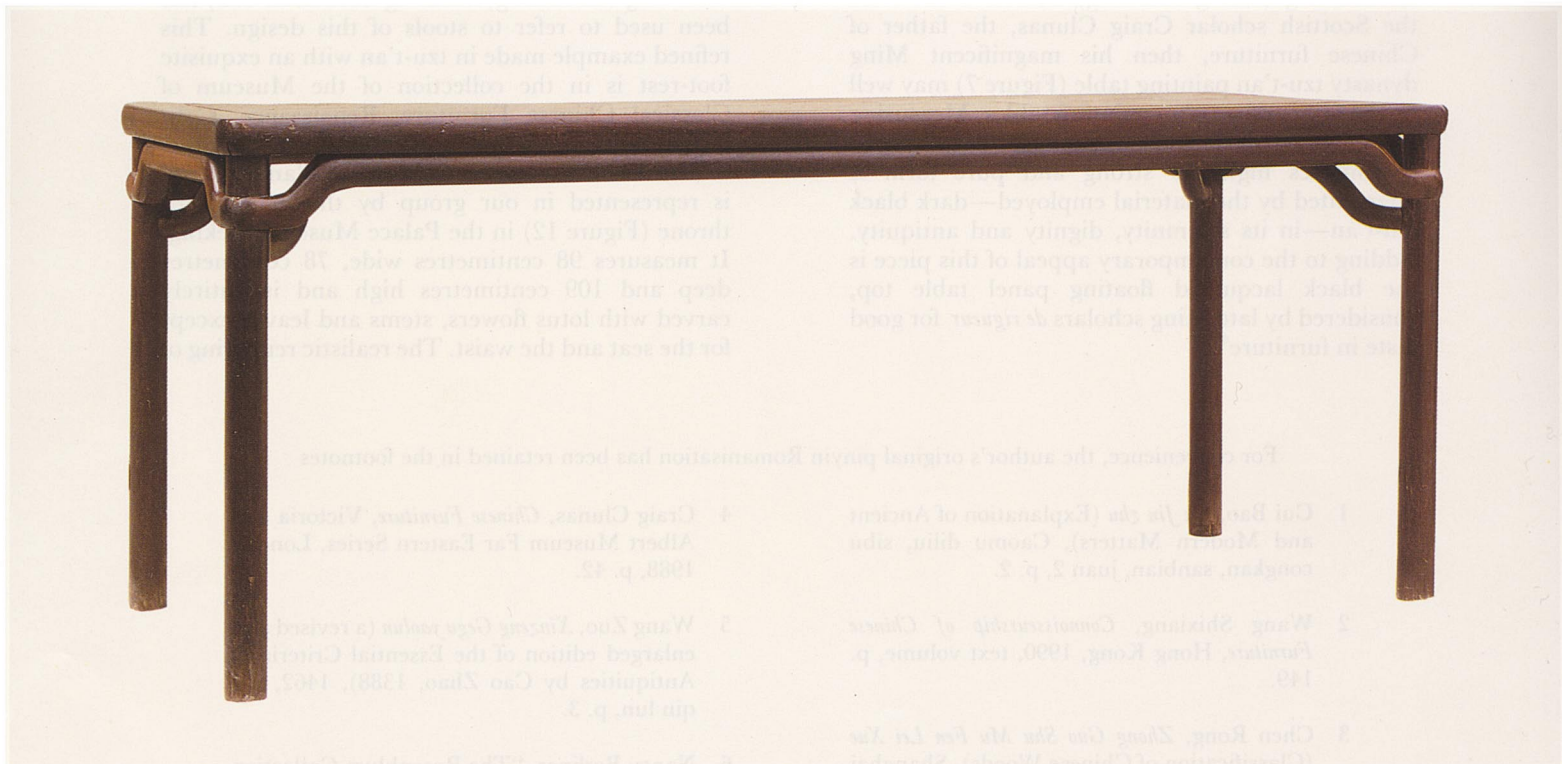


Figure 7 Tzu-t'an painting table. Ming dynasty. Height 78 cms, length 190 cms, depth 74 cms. Wang Shih-hsiang Collection, courtesy of Wang Shih-hsiang



Figure 8 Tzu-t'an lute table. Ming dynasty. Private collection, London



Figure 9 Top view of the cover of a tzu-t'an box. Height 10.7 cms, width 34.5 cms, depth 16.5 cms. Grace Wu Bruce Collection



Figure 10 Tzu-t'an folding stool. Ming dynasty.
Height 48 cms, width 58.6 cms, depth 39 cms.
Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance



Figure 11 Tzu-t'an stand. Ming dynasty. Height 84 cms, width 82 cms, depth 38 cms. Grace Wu Bruce Collection



Figure 12 Tzu-t'an throne with lotus design. Ming dynasty. Height 109 cms, width 98 cms, depth 78 cms. Palace Museum, Peking, courtesy of the Palace Museum



Figure 13 Tzu-t'an painting table. Ming dynasty. Maximum dimensions: height 84 cms, width 180 cms, depth 85 cms. Palace Museum, Peking, courtesy of the Palace Museum

the lotus is unusual in that the normal carved motif on furniture is highly stylised.

The Chinese scholar Chu Chia-chin (Zhu Jiajin)⁷ suggested that this type of large chair was used as a throne in a palace setting with screens and fans, and as a chair behind a large desk table or even singularly placed in front of a window with a vista in a domestic setting. Called "meditation chairs" in Ming texts, these chairs are large enough to be sat on cross-legged and usually have a head-rest.

There is another superb example of the decorated tradition in the Palace Museum, a large

painting table (Figure 13) carved all over with *ling-chih* (lingzhi) fungus, the tight grained tzu-t'an enhancing the richness of the high relief carving. Both this and the throne are masterpieces of the Ming carver's art.

Of the surviving examples of tzu-t'an furniture dated to the Ming and early Ch'ing, the rarest type is the chair. Thus the following two examples are true treasures indeed: the large "southern official's hat" armchair (Figure 14) with its satin-like lustre, and the small "rose" chair (Figure 15) with its jade smooth texture.

Two other early Ch'ing examples shown here

retain all the essence of Ming, supremely beautiful and confident in their innovative variation: the stool (Figure 16), and the lute table (Figure 17) whose mate is in the Summer Palace, Peking⁸.

I also include three illustrations of small pieces of furniture meant for usage on tables. The mirror stand (Figure 18), crisply carved with heads of dragons, is similar to pieces often seen in woodblock prints and paintings gracing dressing tables placed near large canopy beds. The double six game board is inlaid with ivory (Figure 19). The game of double six is recorded as a game played at court as early as the T'ang (Tang, 618–907) dynasty⁹ and continued to be popular until the early Ch'ing when it fell out of fashion. The scroll end stand (Figure 20) measures 58.5 centimetres wide, 29.2 centimetres deep and 10.9 centimetres high. Its simple form underpins the beauty of the natural wood employed.

Distinguished writers on Chinese furniture are in unanimous agreement that tzu-t'an is considered by the Chinese to be the most prized cabinet wood. Any request for such pieces in Hong Kong's Hollywood Road would be met by tales of their rarity accompanied by nods of approval for one's superior taste as well as a higher price tag. The high artistic value of the pieces just discussed coupled with the prominent display of Ch'ing pieces in the Forbidden City, Peking, as well as the National Palace Museum, Taipei, would seem to confirm their unassailable status. Examination of the premise of such a widely held and long established assumption may be a thankless as well as a foolish task.

In recent years, huge progress has been made in the study of Chinese hardwood furniture of the Ming period. Scholarly writings¹⁰ devoted to the subject in the past decade have exceeded the total body of previously available reference material. In 1990, Wang Shih-hsiang published *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, a momentous work representing over forty years of meticulous research of the widest variety of furniture types. This continuing improvement in the level of scholarship and connoisseurship in the field is matched only by the steady stream of "new" material available.

Against this backdrop of scholarly research, new data and information provided by the emerging body of surviving examples, an exploration down untrodden paths seems less risky.

Among late Ming texts, there are several that have passages that discuss furniture, their arrangement, and most of all what is in good or bad taste: T'u Lung (Tu Long), *K'ao-p'an yu-shih* (Kaopan yushi, Random Notes of a Scholar in Seclusion)¹¹, completed in 1607; Wen Chen-heng (Wen Zhenheng, 1585–1645), *Chang wu-chih* (Zhang wu zhi, Treatise on Superfluous Things)¹²; and Li Yu (1611–1680), *Hsien-ch'ing ou-chi* (Xian qing ou ji, Random Notes on Times of Leisure)¹³.

According to Wen Chen-heng¹⁴, on the modes of beds and day-beds: "Recently there are pieces with inset Dali marble; red or black lacquer pieces with a faded finish, carved with patterns of bamboo and then filled; the new mother-of-pearl inlaid pieces are vulgar; others in well figured nan, zitan and huali made in traditional designs are desirable. . ."

On tables and stands, he had the following to say: "Tianranji (naturalistic tables or stands) use well figured wood like huali, tieli or xiangnan for their manufacture. . ."

On chairs: "Chair designs are numerous, a Yuan inlaid piece seen was big enough to seat two, its design may have been the oldest; the most expensive and precious, however, are the pieces made in wumu with inset Dali marble, in traditional design. . ."

According to at least one late Ming arbiter of taste, tzu-t'an appears similar to other cabinet woods. If anything, *wu-mu* (wumu, ebony) seems to have been preferred in the few passages found mentioning wood.

Whether the black coloured furniture depicted in woodblock prints like the illustration to the drama *Hsi Hsiang-chi* (Xi Xiangji, The West Chamber) in Figure 21 or the fifteenth century painting *Wan Ku-t'u* (Wan Gu Tu, Enjoying Antiques) by Tu Chin (Du Jin) in Figure 22 is made of tzu-t'an or the much exalted plain black lacquer is unclear. What is clear is the strong preference by some late Ming scholars for plain lacquered furniture as discussed in the research of Craig Clunas¹⁵.

Among surviving examples of furniture, tzu-t'an pieces datable to the mid Ch'ing, nineteenth and twentieth century are numerous. Almost all the pieces in both the Forbidden City and the National Palace Museum belong to this group. It is not unusual for old Canton families to have whole rooms of tzu-t'an furniture. Twentieth century collectors of Chinese art, both in Hong Kong and

7 Zhu Jiajin, *Mantau Yideng jiqi chenshe qeshi* (On chairs and stools and their methods of arrangement), *Wenwu cankao ziliao* 1959:6, pp. 1–5.

8 Wang Shixiang, *Classic Chinese Furniture: Ming and Early Qing Dynasties*, Hong Kong, 1986, plate 95.

9 Chen Zengbi, *Shuangliu* (Double six), *Wenwu* 1982:4, pp. 78–82.

10 The main publications on classic Chinese furniture of the past decade in chronological order: R.H. Ellsworth, *Chinese Hardwood Furniture in Hawaiian Collections*, Honolulu, 1982; S.A. Handler, "Pieces in context: An approach to the study of Chinese furniture

through an analysis of Ming dynasty domestic hardwood examples in Kansas City", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Kansas, 1983; Yang Yao, *Ming Shi Jiaju Yanjiu*, Beijing, 1984; Wang Shixiang, *Classic Chinese Furniture: Ming and Early Qing Dynasties*, Hong Kong, 1986 (originally published in Chinese as *Ming Shi Jiaju Zhenshang*, Hong Kong, 1985); Craig Clunas, *Chinese Furniture*, Victoria and Albert Museum Far Eastern Series, London, 1988; Wang Shixiang, *Ming Shi Jiaju Yanjiu*, Hong Kong, 1989.

11–13 Translation after Craig Clunas, *ibid.* 4, p. 10.

14 Wen Zhenheng, *Zhang wu zhi*, juan 6.

15 *ibid.* 4, pp. 41–42.

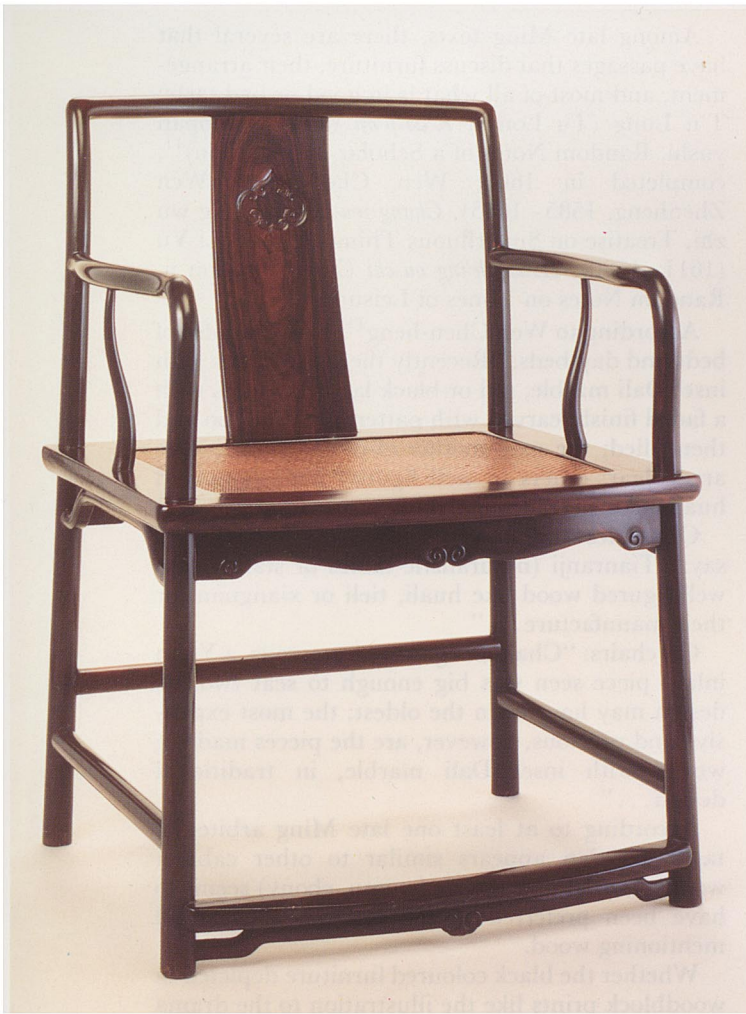


Figure 14 Tzu-t'an southern official's hat armchair. Ming or early Ch'ing. Height 94 cms, width 60.5 cms, depth 56.5 cms. Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance

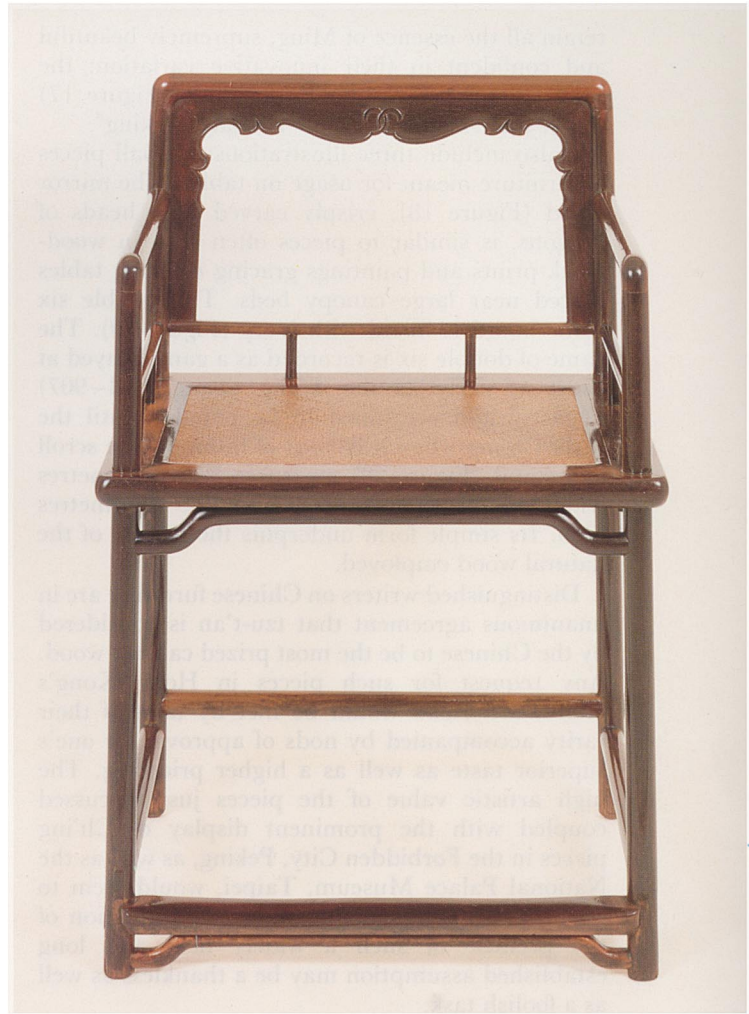


Figure 15 Tzu-t'an rose chair. Ming or early Ch'ing. Height 83.5 cms, width 55.5 cms, depth 45 cms. Grace Wu Bruce Co. Ltd



Figure 16 Pair of tzu-t'an stools. Early Ch'ing. Height 50 cms, width 49.5 cms, depth 42 cms. Mr and Mrs Robert P. Piccus Collection



Figure 17 Tzu-t'an lute table. Early Ch'ing. Height 83.3 cms, width 105.8 cms, depth 35.3 cms. Pei-yu-chai (Beiyuzhai) Collection



Figure 18 Tzu-t'an mirror stand. Ming dynasty. Private collection, London



Figure 19 Tzu-t'an double six game board. Late Ming or early Ch'ing. Height 5.9 cms, width 45.1 cms, depth 29.6 cms. Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance



Figure 20 Tzu-t'an scroll end stand. Late Ming or early Ch'ing. Height 10.9 cms, width 58.5 cms, depth 29.2 cms. Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance

Taiwan, often have tzu-t'an reception rooms.

This large number of Ch'ing pieces is not matched by their predecessors of the Ming. The recent five years have seen early furniture become the focus of both scholarly and collecting attention with the corresponding emergence of fresh material. The bulk of this group is made of huang

hua-li, a Southeast Asian rosewood varying in colour from a light honey to a rich mahogany which can be finely figured. Tzu-t'an furniture datable to this period is extremely rare. It is interesting to note that in Wang Shih-hsiang's *Classic Chinese Furniture*¹⁶, of the 165 examples illustrated, twenty-five were made in tzu-t'an and only thirteen of those were dated to the Ming. It is the author's experience that less than one per cent of the surviving examples of Ming furniture is in tzu-t'an. (Future researchers must be cautious in redressing this ratio as, even now, high quality reproductions of Ming style tzu-t'an furniture are being fashioned and antique finished in both South China and Hong Kong. The past year has seen the mysterious appearance of large quantities of high grade tzu-t'an wood at low prices on the market, all of which will likely be turned into Ming style chairs and tables, to be passed off to the unwary.)

If tzu-t'an was the most favoured cabinet wood in the Ming dynasty, why are there so few surviving examples in relation to huang hua-li? Were they so expensive as to be prohibitive?

Wang Shih-hsiang's research on custom duty and tax has provided the following information¹⁷:

	Zitan	huali	wumu/tieli
Zhejiang Province Ming (1567) wood cost/jin	1 qian	4 fen	2 fen
Zhejiang Custom Qing (1644-1911) duty rate/100 jin	5 qian	1.5 qian	1.5 qian
Guangdong Custom (1821-1850) duty rate/100 jin	9 qian	1 qian	1 qian

It would seem that while tzu-t'an was two and a half times the cost of hua-li in the Ming dynasty, in subsequent centuries its duty rate was from over three to nine times that of hua-li!

Tan Dan Jiong, the Taipei historian, wrote: "In the Ch'ing dynasty, the court and the very wealthy families used tzu-t'an furniture; the ordinarily wealthy used hua-li, hong-mu and t'ieh-li while the general people used woods that were locally available."¹⁸

What we seem to have so far is the confirmation that China and its people from mid Ch'ing onward did prefer tzu-t'an over other prized cabinet woods despite the exorbitant price. Whether sixteenth century man agreed is uncertain. What is certain is that tzu-t'an was more expensive and furniture made from it very much rarer than, for example, huang hua-li wood. It must follow that it was cherished, and who would doubt that looking at the examples illustrated here. However, it does seem that our present-day awe and esteem for tzu-t'an may be a legacy of the Ch'ing rather than the Ming.

16 *ibid.* 8.

17 *ibid.* 2, pp. 148-150.

18 Tan Dan Jiong, *The Art of the Ching Dynasty Furniture*, National Museum of History, Taipei, Taiwan, 1985, p. 23.



Figure 21 Illustration to the drama *Hsi Hsiang-chi* (The West Chamber). Published by Chiao-shan-t'ang (Jiaoshantang), Nanking, Wan Li (1573-1619)

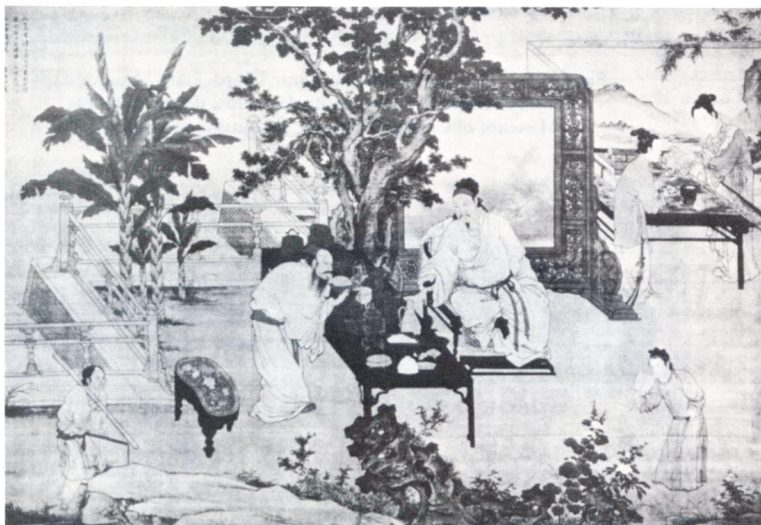


Figure 22 Detail after *Wan Ku-t'u* (Enjoying Antiques) by Tu Chin. Ming dynasty. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan